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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001667

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/18/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)  
SUBJECT: TURKEY: OPPONENTS SEE CHINKS IN AKP'S ARMOR AMID  
CORRUPTION ALLEGATIONS AND ECONOMIC WOES

REF: ANKARA 1643

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary and comment: Critics of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) point to a recent SONAR company poll showing a decline in AKP's popularity to 32 percent as a sign voters are souring on the party. Opposition politicians, journalists, and analysts believe a struggling economy and persistent allegations of corruption have tarnished AKP's reputation and leave the party vulnerable. AKP contacts dismissed the poll as unreliable and insist the party's own polling shows its popularity has risen to 52 percent. Turkish polling has historically been inaccurate; in the lead-up to July 2007 parliamentary elections, most polls predicted AKP would capture 35-40 percent of the vote -- far under the 47 percent it ultimately received. Though opposition parties will continue to try to connect AKP to corruption and economic woes, AKP's diligent election preparations and robust local organizational structures, combined with the lack of any decent alternative, mean AKP remains the strong front-runner leading up to March 2009 local elections. End summary and comment.

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Poll Shows Dramatic Drop in AKP Support  
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12. (U) SONAR polling company's September 1-9 poll concluded voter support for AKP has plummeted in recent weeks. When 2927 people in 22 provinces, 22 sub-provinces and 36 villages were asked "Who would you vote for if elections were held today," 32 percent responded AKP, 22 percent CHP, 14 percent MHP, 6 percent DTP, and the remainder for other parties that have not performed well in recent elections. (Note: In July 22, 2007 parliamentary elections, AKP received 47 percent of the vote, CHP 21, and MHP 14.) When asked wither AKP government was successful, 52 percent responded no, 29 percent yes, and 19 percent undecided. Those polled showed discontent over a struggling economy and possible AKP ties to corruption. Sixty-three percent said they regarded the current economy negatively and only 20 percent saw it in a positive light. Thirty-two percent of respondents believed the Prime Ministry is connected to the Deniz Feneri corruption scandal (reftel), 19 percent said it is not, and 48 percent said they did not know. Evincing a lack of trust in the government, 65 percent said they did not believe official figures on inflation, while 23 percent did.

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AKP Vulnerable Amid Weak Economy, Corruption Scandals

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13. (C) Opposition Democratic Left Party (DSP) MP Huseyin Pazarci told us a weak economy and AKP's ties to corruption had led to its drastic decline in the SONAR poll. Pazarci felt that an important sign of AKP corruption was the "clear evidence" that AKP MP Saban Disli had used political influence for personal profit, leading Disli to resign as party whip. A sign of deeper AKP corruption is the Deniz Feneri scandal, Pazarci said, noting German judge Jurgen Muller's September 17 statement upon announcing the verdict that the "whole organization was directed from Turkey" and "Zekeriya Karaman, director of Kanal 7 (a station with close ties to AKP), had a big influence in the crime." Pazarci also noted that German prosecutor Kerstin Lotz said at the verdict that the real directors of the embezzlement scheme are in Turkey. Combined with a weak economy, such corruption cases had dented confidence in AKP among the rural voters in his Balikesir Province district, south of Istanbul, Pazarci thought.

14. (U) Main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) Vice Chairman Cevdet Selvi slammed AKP during a September 17 press conference for its "corruption and looting." Selvi called on PM Erdogan to immediately "declare his properties" before the public." Selvi charged AKP with failing to carry out its economic promises, which he said had led former AKP voters to "run out of patience."

15. (C) Eurasia Group's Turkey analyst Wolfango Picolli told us he also believes AKP is slipping in the polls due to a weak economy and corruption. Picolli believes the worldwide

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slowdown is having a great impact on Turkey, and that "no one in the GOT knows how to react." The liquidity of the Turkish economy puts it at risk, according to Picolli, who noted that, if \$8 billion moves out of Turkey, it will cause a 20 percent drop in the lira. Voters are feeling the pinch, with high unemployment verging on 20 percent, even though official figures put it at 9, Picolli said. The continuing fallout of the Deniz Feneri corruption case in Germany has also affected Turkish voters, who know that corruption is endemic in Turkey but who still do not like to see their political leaders getting caught with their hands in the till. Many who voted for AKP feel betrayed, Picolli told us. Further economic problems, or additional details of the Deniz Feneri scandal coming to light, could spell trouble for AKP, Picolli said.

16. (U) Newspaper columnists have also recently opined that AKP is vulnerable. Cuneyt Ulsever, a columnist in mainstream "Hurriyet," wrote on September 17, "it is unclear whether PM Erdogan is really aware of the serious nature of the global economic crisis. Corruption and poverty are famous for toppling governments. It looks like the duo is just about to strike in Turkey." Liberal-intellectual "Radikal's" Murat Yetkin said the Turkish government and judiciary must open a comprehensive investigation into the Deniz Feneri case, "otherwise it will not be easy for AKP to come out of this cleanly."

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AKP Dismisses Poll, Says Popularity Up  
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17. (C) AKP contacts dismissed the results of the SONAR poll as unreliable. Vice Chair Egemen Bagis told us September 17 the man-on-the-street admired PM Erdogan's willingness to stand up to Dogan, a figure who had long been able to "get his way through lies and campaigns of media pressure" (reftel). Bagis said AKP's popularity had actually been boosted to 52 percent, according to AKP's own figures, which Bagis believes to be far more reliable because AKP uses four different polling companies to conduct two detailed polls each month. Though the economy is a worry, Bagis felt voters in local elections would be swayed most by the personalities of candidates. In his Istanbul district, voters appear to hold a very favorable view of AKP now, unlike their "more

distant" attitude toward the party during the closure case. Bagis contended that "Erdogan is riding high," maintaining good relations with President Gul and with no potential rivals within AKP.

18. (C) AKP MP Eyup Fatsa also questioned the credibility of the SONAR poll, telling reporters that polling companies critical of the ruling party always try to conduct snap polls during periods of controversy or distress. Fatsa pointed out that in a September survey conducted by Metropoll, 51 percent of respondents said they would vote for AKP if elections were held today, while only 9.5 said they would vote for CHP. AKP whip Sadullah Ergin told us though "daily developments" may have influenced respondents in the SONAR poll, AKP retains strong support from a "silent majority" that understands the Turkish media is biased. Ergin noted that when Erdogan successfully ran for Istanbul mayor in 1994, voters rejected the Dogan media group's "slander campaign against him." He thought this silent majority would again tune out the media noise and support AKP.

19. (C) Bagis and Ergin told us AKP will press ahead with Third National Program reforms during the upcoming October session of Parliament. According to Ergin, AKP would pass new legislation as part of its continuing struggle to create fundamental democracy in Turkey. Bagis insisted there would be concrete progress on EU reforms by the end of October. Both said a cabinet reshuffle is likely, but claimed no knowledge of PM Erdogan's leanings on potential changes. Bagis believes Erdogan will create a cabinet-level position for an EU negotiator, but denied rumors that he is slated for the new portfolio.

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A Mistake to Underestimate AKP  
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110. (C) Following AKP's overwhelming victory in July 2007 parliamentary elections, many believe it would be foolish to

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underestimate the party's potential in March 2009 local elections. KONDA polling company's director Bekir Agirdir sounded a note of caution when he told reporters, "Before July 22 elections there were some polls that showed CHP would get 29 percent and AKP 28 percent. Most polls predicted AKP would capture 35-40 percent of the vote. But a very different and unexpected result occurred." Picolli believes AKP is preoccupied with local elections to the point of being indifferent about its much-touted Third National Plan. According to Picolli, AKP talks a good game on EU accession and the National Plan, but it's all theater. These are all old plans and there's no real focus. When it comes to elections, Picolli sees AKP as formidable: organized, well-funded, and focused. AKP knows what matters to voters at the local level: clean water, utilities, and handouts.

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